

# Greek tragedy and its audiences

Lorna Hardwick

In the last issue of *Omnibus* Claire Catenaccio revealed some of the problems faced by the director of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Here Lorna Hardwick considers how modern and ancient audiences compare, and looks at a recent production of Euripides' *Bacchae* to see how modern audiences can be brought up to speed with ancient plays.

The spectators in ancient Greek theatres have had a bad press. Aristophanes in *Peace* mentions 'stick-carriers' (*rhabdouchoi*), who were apparently in the theatre 'to keep order among the audience'. Thucydides has the politician Cleon taunt the *demos* for being like theatre-goers, simply dazzled by words. Socrates in Plato's *Gorgias* alleges that even tragedy has become like rhetoric, 'imprisoned by its desire to please the spectators', and in Plato's *Laws* one speaker laments the way in which the lust for pleasure has led to the mixing of different types of music and the emergence of a decadent 'theatocracy'.

So how different were ancient audiences from modern audiences? Comments on the relative value of reverent listening and popular enthusiasm and the impact of different types of music and verbal or visual fireworks are not unknown today. It has been the claim of theatre throughout the ages that enjoyment and transformation of personal and social awareness go together and are part of the theatre experience. Pleasure and good judgement aren't incompatible. So were ancient spectators just like us?

## What did ancient audiences bring to drama?

Theatre audiences in ancient Athens were never totally homogeneous, but most of them did share some common frameworks. There was a common Greek religious and cultural identity, including the experience of such large festivals as the Great Dionysia at which the plays were performed. The myths and stories that most of the tragedies drew on would have been familiar to almost all Greeks. All Athenians shared knowledge of the politicians and social situations that were lampooned in the comedies.

Excavating the individual spectator is

more difficult. In some cases, where the public inscriptions survive, we know which plays found favour with the judges at the Great Dionysia or the Lenaea, and even who directed and financed them. But we lack ancient evidence about the kinds of individual and group responses that we have for modern theatre.

There are some inventive ways of trying to fill in the gaps in our knowledge about ancient audiences. Recently scholars have tried to map the skills the audience had in decoding allusions or picking up visual signs sent out by set design and costumes. Attaining a degree of theatre competence was probably quite easy in Athens because theatre was a community experience. It is different for modern spectators. However classically knowledgeable they may be, they can never be ancient Athenians. Nowadays theatre presents ancient plays in physical, theatrical, and cultural environments far removed from the Greek. Spectating skills need experience, memory, and practice in order to develop. Areas where the experiences of ancient audiences are hard to parallel today might include the Chorus and the Messenger Speech, and responsiveness to integrated music, song and movement as well as to the Mask. The really competent ancient spectator would also be able to spot allusions to other plays or performance styles or to poetry lost to us. These deeper skills would be enhanced by repeated exposure to or even participation in performance poetry at the festivals that were an integral part of the civic and religious environment. Non-professionals certainly participated in dithyramb and dramatic choruses. Of course, some modern audience members too have taken part in school, university, or community theatricals.

## Are modern audiences different?

Modern audiences are more diverse than in ancient Athens. Quite apart from the high proportion of female spectators there are wide differences in cultural knowledge. Spectators are often unfamiliar with the myths that form the basis of tragedies, and with the gods and their roles. Few can be expected to pick up allusions within the plays to images or episodes from Homer or to ways in which the dramatists picked up on other treatments of the stories associated with Electra or with Troy.

This can have ironic effects. Some spectators at the 2007 Edinburgh Festival première of David Greig's version of Euripides' *Bacchae* were heard to comment that the ending was 'too explicit and modern'. They were repelled by the sequence in which, after her Maenads have dismembered him, Agave comes to realize that she is holding the head of her son Pentheus. They thought this must be some kind of dubious 'post-modern' addition, tacked on to a more austere Greek original. Stereotypes die hard. In fact, David Greig's acting script followed the forms and tone of the Greek quite closely.

## Recreating the *Bacchae* in Edinburgh

This performance of *Bacchae* was staged as part of the new National Theatre of Scotland repertoire and directed by John Tiffany (who had studied Classics at the University of Glasgow). The script was prepared from a literal translation made by Ian Ruffell who teaches at Glasgow University. Greig wanted the audience to be aware of how the script was created. Ruffell worked from the Greek; Greig from Ruffell's translation. Greig was particularly interested in what the Athenian audience experienced when they watched the play. Ruffell wanted to inject into the acting script the 'flavour of the play's word-order and line structure'. The implication is that the impact of ancient theatre poetry and dialogue can be communicated, producing emotional impact and understanding even when the original social and historical situation is suppressed or misunderstood by the spectators.

Some aspects of the play are readily translatable in terms of modern sensibilities. Take the character of Pentheus and the relationship between political and physical power and between (Scottish) masculinity and repression. By contrast many of the references to Greek mythology had to be removed. It was felt that they would confuse a modern audience because they are not part of modern understanding of how the world is constituted. The Prologue became a pared-down skeleton, omitting mythological details of Dionysus' relationships with the gods and instead addressing and involving the modern audience directly by reference to their (assumed) world-view. Dionysus became The Scream, picking up the Euripidean metaphor of the Bull. The Scream was used throughout the play to relocate Dionysus to modern celebrity culture, aligning it with the image of the star actor Alan Cumming as well as with the insights of psychoanalysis.

As a theatrical event, the play and its special effects were stunning. At the beginning Dionysus was lowered upside down on to the stage in a gold lamé dress that revealed (almost) all. There were dramatic lighting effects, pop-up floral displays, and blazing fire (when the prison was destroyed by the storm the audience literally felt the heat). There was also extensive integration of popular art forms. Cadmus and Tiresias played their encounter as music-hall turn, twirling canes and dressed in spats. The Chorus were red-robed Gospel singers – in the performance that I saw the applause was so enthusiastic that the *parodos* was turned into a show-stopper. In the scene where Dionysus seduces Pentheus into agreement to become a cross-dressing voyeur the Chorus became backing singers, celebrating Queer culture.

### **Translation as recreation**

All of this might seem to get a long way from the competences of ancient viewers. But one way to think about the translation of drama is that it should make the play matter to today's audience in the way that it mattered to the original audience. Involving classicists in the translation and staging of Greek plays does not mean that those translations and productions have to be marked by a negative reverence, or a prescriptive 'do it like this' approach. Rather the play is an opportunity to communicate a sense of what it might have been like to watch Greek drama. The aim is to open up understanding of aspects of tragedy that might otherwise be repressed, not to make tragedy totally alien. The Greig *Bacchae* has been hailed as an example of how 'being most faithful is being most radical'. The responses of the outraged audience members in Edinburgh, who did not know that the

voyeurism and the violence were authentically Euripidean, actually demonstrate how theatre can bring both skilled and unskilled spectators to reveal and perhaps confront their own assumptions.

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